Silent Sentinel, Unfinished Battle: Anne Dorris Chisolm and the Fight for Women's Suffrage

April Hearn Feagley g'23

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April Hearn Feagley is Associate Director of Media Relations.

I am so excited to introduce you to a woman I have come to admire tremendously over the past 15 years. I first "met" Anne Dorris Chisolm shortly after I began working at *The Daily News*. I was asked to research a longstanding local tradition known as the "Auntie Dorrie" or "Annie Dorrie" party. The resulting story, one I have the privilege of sharing with you, is one for the ages.

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her."[1]

This is the preamble to the Declaration of Sentiments, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and delivered to the 300 attendees at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1847. The first women's rights convention in the United States was closely tied to the abolitionist movement and drew many prominent individuals including Frederick Douglass and Lucretia Mott.

In a stately home at 401 Penn Street in 1863, a baby girl joined the family of William Dorris, his wife, Julia, and his two sons from his first marriage, 11-year-old William and 5-year-old John. Anne would be joined by sisters, Julia and Mary, over the next three years.

Anne graduated from the Mountain Female Seminary, now Grier School, in nearby Birmingham, Pennsylvania. She traveled to Dresden, Germany, twice in her lifetime to study the art of stained glass. Her renown in her craft led to her selling her work in New York City for a time and being commissioned to create a 6 foot by 6 foot Italianate stained glass window for the Women's Pavilion of the Columbia Exhibition (Chicago World's Fair).

Her father and two brothers were attorneys, and her father went on to become President of First National Bank.

The suffrage movement at the time of Anne's birth 16 years after the Seneca Falls Convention was undergoing a difficult change. Most efforts for women's right to vote ceased with the onset of the

Civil War. Staunch abolitionists within the movement rejoiced with the ratification of the 13th Amendment ending slavery. But some grew increasingly frustrated when the 14th Amendment failed to deliver women the right to vote and downright furious when the 15th Amendment provided formerly enslaved men the right to vote but did nothing for women. Some heroines of the movement enlisted tactics that are deeply disturbing through a modern lens. With the goal of swinging popular opinion, the newly-reunified Southern women were recruited into the fight through fear-mongering–stating that women must have the right to vote to offset the dangerous votes of immigrants and formerly enslaved men.[2]

Disagreements arose over this rhetoric as well as the political machinations employed led to a split in the movement. The National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA) was founded in 1890 with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Carrie Chapman Catt at the helm. The primary strategy was to recruit wealthy members to the movement, with the aim of raising public approval. For NAWSA, the rejection of the proposed suffrage amendment by the U.S. Senate in 1887 meant the path to gaining women the right to vote laid at the state level. The group focused its efforts on swinging enough states to move legislation at the federal level.[3]

Alice Paul joined NAWSA in 1910, but continuing conflict over tactics led her to create the National Women's Party in 1916. She, along with Lucy Burns, led the NWP in the adoption of the more militant tactics they had observed in their work with the suffrage movement in Great Britain. Through demonstrations, rallies, and civil disobedience, the NWP aimed for a constitutional amendment to provide women with the vote.[4] While we don't know exactly when Anne became active in the suffrage movement, the fact she was supported in her education and independence means we can surmise Anne was in favor of the vote from early adulthood.

Anne cared for her father in his later years. Following his death, along with her two sisters, she was executor of his estate. This entailed navigating a thorny lawsuit against the Morrisdale Coal Company in Clearfield County, of which William Dorris had been a founding partner. Anne was unusual for her time and era, living at home, moving independently through society, and being self-sustained with her own income.

A POWER COUPLE AND A MILITANT MOVEMENT

Meet William Wallace Chisolm . . . To quote Inigo Montoya from The Princess Bride, "Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up."

He was born in 1866 in Kemper County, Mississippi. His father, 19-year-old sister and 13-year-old brother were killed by a mob of 300 members of the Ku Klux Klan in the infamous Chisolm Massacre in 1877.[5] Young Billy, as he was called, moved to Washington, D.C., with his mother, who found work

as a clerk at the U.S. Treasury Department. By 1900, he had moved to Huntingdon where he was living with his elder brother, Dr. H. C. Chisolm, and was working as a news reporter. By 1902, he was editor of The Huntingdon Journal and eight years later, he was practicing law in Huntingdon.[6]

On a Wednesday evening on May 29, 1912, 46-year-old Attorney Chisolm married 49-year-old Miss Dorris. Unfortunately, due to a dearth of records, I've been unable to determine where they set up housekeeping. As later records place William's residence at 408 Penn Street very near Anne's family home at 401 Penn, so it seems quite possible they lived there.

The September 27, 1915, issue of The Independent arrived at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Chisolm, where it was read with interest by the lady of the house. The weekly magazine was filled with news of war in Europe, but it was one editorial that particularly caught her attention. The editorial "Two Questions for Unusual Women," had a query for "women of the thoughtful, scientifically-minded sort."

> "Is it true, as some of the lawyers and judges, as well as certain psychologists are saying, that a woman 'intuitively' arraigns, tries, and judges an accused man and above all an accused woman? Does evidence ever make any real impression on her mind after it is 'made up?'
> Can the usual woman think about human relations on the big scale in terms of impersonal causation? Madame Curie, we know, does not think of chemical reactions as the deviltry of 'some man.'
> Are there as many women as men who are capable of grasping the idea that 'hard times,' Crime waves, Sunday ball games, and 'rum selling' may have some other cause than the election of a Democratic President?"[7]

I cannot overstate my excitement when I found this treasure. The October 9, 1915, edition of the St. Louis Star and Times featured a familiar name in its "Everybody's Column, An Open Forum for the People." Beneath the header, "What Women Will Do," Anne told the world exactly what she thought about the questions posed in The Independent:

> He will never have his questions answered by the women he describes, for, like the dodo and the mermaid, if they ever existed, they have long since become extinct. Every thoughtful, scientific woman believes in equal suffrage for men and women, otherwise she would not be thoughtful and scientific. If she is either thoughtful or scientific, she knows she should vote. The Independent neglected to give any reason why a thoughtful and scientific woman, or a stupid and ignorant woman, should not vote equally with a thoughtful and scientific man or a stupid and ignorant man.

> We modern women, being neither sorceresses nor angels, are not attempting the dares of the antis to throw us. We cannot stop the war, and go to war, solve the labor troubles, make the rich richer, the poor poorer, and reduce the price of living. No, we can't and some of it we don't want to. We are asking for the vote so that we may help the men work for better homes, better towns, better States, and a better country. And everyone ought to say, "God bless you" for wanting to help. The water is a bit cold, but come on in.[8]

By the beginning of 1917, the National Woman's Party was determined to gain the attention of President Woodrow Wilson and the nation. On January 10, 12 women marched from the NWP headquarters carrying purple, white, and gold banners to take up a post at the White House gates. These picketers became known as the Silent Sentinels. They did no more than stand with prominently-lettered banners, some of which threw the President's own words back in his face. A few months later, more than 1,000 women braved the cold and rain on March 4 to participate in the "Grand Picket" on the president's inauguration day. The president drove straight past the picketers without acknowledging them.[9]

The Silent Sentinels continued their protest six days a week regardless of the weather. Special days were scheduled for picketing by college women, wage earners, and representatives from various states, occupations, and professional affiliations.

From January to June, the Sentinels were viewed as little more than a nuisance. Even though they were harassed and sometimes even assaulted by passersby, no official action was taken against them. However, pressure was building on two fronts. The U.S. had avoided involvement in the Great War raging in Europe, but demand to send troops was rising at home and abroad. Also, some people were beginning to think the suffragists had a point. Why not answer the questions they were asking?

The country entered World War I on April 6. Protesting a war-time president was "un-American," or so pundits of the era opined. The first arrests of the White House picketers took place on June 22. Arrests continued every few days for months on end. Attacks from bystanders escalated as well as public opinion swelled against the Silent Sentinels.

Mrs. Chisolm went to Washington, D.C. to represent Pennsylvania in early September 1917. She was arrested on Tuesday, September 4.

Those sent to Occoquan with her were Miss Julia Emery of Towson, Maryland; Mrs. Abby Scott Baker of Washington, D.C.; Miss Mary Windsor of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Mrs. W.J. Bartlett of Putnam, Connecticut; Miss Edith Ainge of Buffalo, New York; Miss Maude Malone of New York City, New York; Miss Lucy Branham of Baltimore, Maryland; Mrs. Annie Arniel of Wilmington, Delaware;

Miss Margaret Fotheringham of Buffalo, New York; Mrs. Pauline Adams of Norfolk, Virginia; and Miss Eleanor Calnan of Methuen, Massachusetts.

The technical charge was obstructing traffic.

On the day this group of picketers were posted, one banner had a pointed message. "Mr. President, it is unjust to deny women a voice in their government when the government drafts their sons."

Anne and her cohort were each sentenced to 60 days in the workhouse, which had a well-established reputation for brutal treatment of suffragists.[10]

UNREPENTANT

Here's where the story gets muddled. The local narrative has always been that William traveled to Washington, D.C., immediately after Anne's arrest to bail her out. Anne initially refused, choosing to remain with her fellow suffragists, but later agreed and was released.

Ever-growing digitization of news outlets has added to the cache of information available and I discovered a confounding splash of headlines.

The first desertion from the ranks of the pickets of the Woman's Party was recorded in police court today when Mrs. Anne D. Chisolm of Huntingdon, Pa., came up from Occoquan and promised Judge Pugh she would never repeat the offense. While Mrs. Chisolm stood repentant before the bar of justices, her husband, William W. Chisolm, a prominent attorney of Huntingdon, waited outside with a taxicab ready to take his wife back home. The judge suspended the sentence of sixty days which she had begun to serve, took her personal bond to remain away from the White House, and off she sped in the taxi for Union Station and Huntingdon.

Mr. Chisolm was in the midst of an important trial in Huntingdon when the sheriff of the county brought him the word that his wife had been arrested and sent to jail in Washington. It was the first Mr. Chisolm had heard of his wife's picketing activities, and did not know the meaning of the arrest. Dropping the case, he hurried to the city. Mr. Chisolm told officials at Police Court that he had been an advocate of women suffrage, but that his feelings had changed since he learned of the picketing carried out by the woman's party. Mr. Chisolm is said to have called at the headquarters of the party in Cameron House before leaving the city today and to have expressed to Miss Alice Paul, executive head of the party, his disapproval of White House picketing. The Huntingdon attorney told officials with whom he talked at Police Court that his wife did not know she would be arrested for picketing, and did not come to Washington to violate the law.[11]

So. That article was. . . a lot. And it seems to be the origin of reporting in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and West Virginia. Given that there's no byline or identified source, it's difficult to determine

how the information was gathered. Media literacy skills picked up in the modern age of the internet can work for us here as well.

Answers aren't going to materialize more than 100 years later, so let's apply what we do know to attempt to fill in the gaps.

The first assertion is: William didn't know his wife was picketing.

Here is what we know about William. His mother lobbied congress and wrote prolifically calling upon the legislature to address the evils of "home rule" in Mississippi following the death of her husband and children. His sister was shot three times at close range, yet insisted on walking the length of the town to accompany her father's and brother's bodies back to their home from the jail where they had been taken. She died shortly afterward.

This wasn't a man unacquainted with strong women.

Do we think this is true? Personally, I think it's unlikely.

Second: Anne was unaware she could be arrested for picketing.

The arrests had been ongoing weekly for two months at this point. The national reporting on these arrests was frequent. We know from her editorial that she followed the news and was active in her interest in suffrage.

How about this? Seem plausible?

Third: William had supported women's suffrage but changed his mind after his wife's arrest.

This is an educated, politically-minded, fairly liberal man in middle age. Would he be so fickle as to give up on his wife's passion?

Finally: William called Alice Paul after leaving the courthouse.

Honestly, this inclusion in the article is the thread that made my faith in the accuracy of this article unravel.

How, in a day before cell phones–or even pay phones for that matter–did William call the NWP headquarters if he got in a taxicab and "sped off to Union Station and Huntingdon"?

Regardless of the haste and method of the Chisolms' departure from Washington, D.C., the couple did return to their home following the hearing and settled back into their lives at home.

After the publicity surrounding Anne's release, there's not much on the record concerning her activities. We do know she had a speaking engagement in Tyrone in early December 1917. Her talk, "The Need of Woman Vote in Wartime," was well received by the ladies' civic group–which in itself is a mark of how far the suffrage movement had progressed in garnering public favor.

We'll also later learn that she was very actively volunteering for the war efforts of the Red Cross.

News of Anne's death on January 7, 1918, renewed headlines about her suffrage activities in newspapers throughout the region, as well as in Harrisburg, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and more. Her

commitment to winning the vote for women was omitted from her obituary in the Huntingdon newspaper, however.

If not for the loving legacy her husband left behind in his remarkable will 10 years later, Anne's story might have been lost. You see, that Annie Dorrie or Auntie Dorrie Christmas party? That was William's plan to memorialize his beloved wife–by leaving an endowment to fund an annual party for local children in her name. Since the late 1920s, William's vision of a holiday celebration for children impacted by difficult circumstances has taken place annually. The event is currently organized by the Huntingdon Kiwanis Club, who continue to purchase gifts of toys bearing the tag, "from Auntie Dorrie."

The 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States passed the United States Senate on June 4, 1919 – 18 months after Anne's death and 74 years after the Seneca Falls Convention.

From June 1917 through June 4, 1919, 500 women were arrested for protesting at the White House gates. Of that number, 168 were jailed. Anne Dorris Chisolm's name is recorded in Doris Stevens' account of the efforts of the National Women's Party.

I hope you'll join me in my effort to ensure that Anne's story is not lost, nor any of the other suffragists who fought tenaciously for women to have representation in our government as full citizens.

NOTES

1. "Declaration of Sentiments," New York Historical Park, National Park Service, https://www.nps.gov/wori/learn/historyculture/declaration-of-sentiments.htm
2. Marjorie J. Spruill, "Nemesis: the South and the Nineteenth Amendment," National Park Service, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/nemesis-the-south-and-the-nineteenth-amendment.htm
3. "Why the Women's Rights Movement Split Over the 15th Amendment," Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Site, National Park Service, https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/why-the-women-s-rights-movement-split-over-the-15th-amendment.htm
4. Ibid.
5. William Wallace Chisolm and James M. Wells. *Chisholm Massacre: A Picture of "Home Rule" in Mississippi* (Legare Street Press, 2021).
6. Mount Union Times (Mount Union, Pennsylvania). "Wm. W. Chisolm Called by Death." February 17, 1928. Page 1.
7. *The Independent*. "Two Questions to Unusual Women." September 27, 1915. Volume 83. Number 3186.
8. *St. Louis Star and Times*. "What Women Will Do." October 9, 1915. Page 10.
9. *New York Tribune* (New York, New York) "'Vote' Picket for Wilson." January 10, 1917. Page 1.
10. *The Washington Herald*. "'Suff' Banners Will Fly Again." September 6, 1917. Page 1.
11. *The Washington Times*. "Suffrage Picket Repents: Is Freed from Occoquan." September 7, 1917. Page 3.